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Title: Apologetics without apology

Date: 9 July 2014

Originally given at: Triennial conference of CUAC (Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion), in Seoul, South Korea, 5-11 July 2014

Example citation: Graham, E. L. (2014, July 9). *Apologetics without apology*.

Keynote lecture given at triennial conference of CUAC (Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion), in Seoul, South Korea, 5-11 July 2014

Version of item: Given at conference

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/323823>

# Apologetics without Apology: Navigating our Places in a Globalized and Multi-Faith World

*Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion, July 2014*

## 1. Introduction: the challenge of the ‘post-secular’ university

In their studies of the changing profile of religion in contemporary American higher education (Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2008; 2012), Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen have argued that the renewed visibility of religion in public life (as I would qualify, within the Western world) calls for ‘a more comprehensive and connected conversation ... with religion in its entirety – including its personal and social dimensions, values and ideas, subjective and objective characteristics, and potential for good or ill.’ (Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2008, pp. x-xi)

Yet they are insistent that this new visibility ‘does not represent a movement back toward the past but is actually something quite new’ (Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2012, p. ix). I happen to share this sense that whilst religion may be newly prominent, this state of affairs is an unprecedented, somewhat problematic development. The title of one of Jacobsen & Jacobsen’s books, *The American University in a Postsecular Age* (2008), reflects one way of characterising this complex, emergent era, in which religion is undergoing simultaneous ‘decline, mutation and resurgence’ (Graham, 2013, p. 3). This is a situation which fits neither the narrative of secularization nor that of the return of Christendom. For me, the terminology of the ‘post-secular’ represents a paradoxical, almost agonistic space, in which the gulf between those of faith and those of none is widening.

Arguably, this is not just a concern for individual believers, but is highly pertinent to corporate bodies, such as any faith-based institution like a Christian university (and I recognise that a definition of that may well itself be contested and multi-faceted). Interest in religion is running strongly; but knowledge may be lacking, and societies are often at a loss as to how to manage the enduring presence of religion within a context of greater pluralism, and of diverse ways of believing and not believing. So this is about finding ourselves in a complex and paradoxical situation which is diverse and manifests itself in different ways according to cultural context, but which nevertheless may have strong common currents around the world. And if we are to attempt to navigate our way between the ‘Scylla’ of religious resurgence and the ‘Charybdis’ of secularism, towards new, uncharted ‘post-secular’ lands, what awaits us?

This links strongly with the theme that has been set for us today, of “navigating our way between the twin poles of ‘faithfulness’ and ‘relevance’”. What currency, what usefulness, are the resources of a Christian heritage to institutions that seek to be faithful both to their historic foundation and legacy – rooted perhaps in an era of Christian dominance or colonialism that appears increasingly anachronistic – and yet which truly engage constructively (as well as critically) with changing contexts? When religion is perceived increasingly by many as irrelevant at best, toxic at worst, what does it even mean to ‘speak of God in public’? Can faith-based institutions dare to name their values in pursuit of meaningful presence in a contested and volatile public square?

I want to think about the characteristics of that ‘public theology’ of engagement with what is increasingly being termed a ‘post-secular’ culture. In a world that is more sensitive than ever to religious belief and practice, yet often struggles to accommodate it into secular discourse, how do people of faith give an account of their core theological values in ways that are accessible and comprehensible to an ever more fragmented and sceptical body politic?

My suggestion is that a public theology needs to work at the level of deeds and words; and that Christian organizations and individuals should cultivate a public theology that is *apologetic* in nature. Apologetics is of course the task of offering a reasoned defence or rationale for one’s faith. The early Christian epistle, the first letter of Peter, summarises this imperative as follows: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.* (1 Peter 3.15, NIV). It is not self-derogatory or guilt-ridden; not confrontational or dogmatic, but rooted in a conversational, dialogical space.

But along with offering a rationale for purposeful engagement, and in seeking to contribute to the creation of a civil, dialogical public space, the tradition of public theology affirms some very important theological truths about the nature of our shared humanity and the possibilities for the common good. In ‘seeking the welfare of the city’, public theology acknowledges the service of the Gospel and the *missio Dei* as larger and more expansive than the insights of institutional religion alone. It is an attempt to find common cause in practices of solidarity that don’t seek to privilege or defend Christian supremacy, but are a means of reaching across the ‘post-secular divide’ to those of all faiths and none.

## 2. The Turning of the Tide

‘... the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled “secularisation theory” is essentially mistaken.’ (Berger, 1999, p. 2)

From the last quarter of the twentieth century the world began to see the unexpected ‘re-enchantment’ of global politics – something we can probably date from the Iranian revolution in 1979, the rise of the Moral Majority in the US in the 1980s, the emergence of Islamist movements in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia; clearly, the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 stands as an iconic and devastating moment in all this, as an explicitly-religiously motivated intervention in world affairs.

So on the one hand, religion is strikingly visible in public life – whether we are thinking locally, nationally, or globally. Tony Blair’s recent comment that ‘religious extremism’ will be a major source of global conflict throughout this century may be a little simplistic (ignoring as it does other factors such as competition for natural resources, migration, climate change and economic polarization), but it does go to show that faith is not dead. In many of the most rapidly-developing economies, such as Brazil, China, or India, religion continues to grow and to be a significant part of public life. Even in the UK, this is particularly evident in areas of public policy, which

highlights the renewed currency of religious belief and practice, particularly around its potentially beneficial contribution to welfare reform, well-being and community cohesion.

On the other hand, however, there is little reason, certainly for those of us in my particular part of northern Europe, to feel quite so sanguine about the resilience of religion or its future prospects. Levels of formal institutional affiliation and membership in mainstream Christian and Jewish denominations continue to diminish across the Western world. Religion continues to be held as deeply suspect by others – such as the so-called ‘New Atheists’ who resist as strongly as ever the encroachment of the things of faith into public life. Religious observance is increasingly disaffiliated and individualized; religious institutions are viewed with indifference at best, distrust at worst.

This has had profound effect on intellectuals within political philosophy, social theory as well as study of religion. Assumptions that an inevitable consequence of economic modernization right across all cultures would be the disappearance of religion. In political theory, this meant the model of the separation between religion and the body politic and the creation of a neutral public square in which ‘talk of God’ and allusions to the sacred were deemed illegitimate modes of speech. But circumstances have required that this thesis be revised.

Writers such as Talal Asad (2003) have made connections between such revisionism and post-colonial critiques of Western ways of thinking. The very concept of secularization, and the binary logic of secular and sacred, hinged on Western readings of history and culture that have been exposed as far from universal or inevitable. So the revision of this thesis, was, then, partly a recognition that the conceptual framework didn’t fit; and partly a realisation that global events were moving in new, unexpected directions. Religion was not in terminal decline; yet at the same time, this was not a simple case of what Peter Berger termed ‘desecularization’ – not at least in terms of reversal. Some of the reasons for this are:

- (i) Many cultures in the global South especially had never been secular although they may still have struggled to accommodate forces of globalization, modernisation with the traditional powers of religious authority and identity.
- (ii) For those in the West, religion re-emerged but into a radically and irrevocably secular age – the ‘post-secular’ Rubicon had been crossed.
- (iii) We may have the signs of decline, of slow but steady marginalisation, and yet there are contrary trends which suggest that it is not simply about accommodating to the inevitabilities of secularization. Whatever forms of religion hold sway, they are far more deinstitutionalised and fluid due to social media, globalisation and post-traditional forms of church. People are more likely to describe themselves as ‘Spiritual but not Religious’. Statistics on the religious outlooks and affiliations of young people (including university students) note this most strongly (ComRes, 2013) (Pew Forum, 2010); (Guest *et al*, 2013).

So as far as many parts of the world are concerned, this new dispensation represents much less of a religious revival and much more a

quest for a new presence in the midst of public life that is more fragmented, more global, more disparate. It is a context in which the contribution of religion to the well-being of communities is welcomed by some, with new agendas and increasing enthusiasm; but at the same time, the very legitimacy of faith to speak or contribute at all is contested as vigorously as ever.

The philosopher and critic Terry Eagleton puts it most eloquently in his latest book, *Culture and the Death of God*:

The world is ... divided between those who believe too much and those who believe too little' (Eagleton, 2014, pp. 197-8)

### **3. The Christian University and the Idea of Public Theology**

One of the implications of this for churches and other Christian institutions is that if they are committed to any kind of significant public role, any kind of mission to wider society, then the nature of their public presence must change. No longer are they speaking into a common frame of reference, in which their Biblical or moral allusions fall comfortably on waiting ears. Rather, in a context where people's familiarity with any kind of organized religion is ever more tenuous, faith-based institutions will need to find a new language by which they justify the legitimacy of religion within public life.

In my recent book (Graham, 2013), I consider whether the discipline of public theology can articulate new norms for Christians who are concerned to engage constructively with public debate and political policy, who are aware of the growing gulf between the discourse of faith and what Friedrich Schleiermacher called its 'cultured despisers', yet still want to communicate the basis of their faith and the roots of their concern for the common good convincingly and reasonably to the world at large.

Public theology varies across different contexts, but has a number of core features. Broadly, it seeks to comment and critically reflect from a theological perspective, on aspects of public life such as economics, politics, culture and media. Traditionally, the notion of 'public' has encompassed several dimensions: firstly, a commitment to the public, social and structural articulation of religion in the face of its privatization or withdrawal into forms of personal piety (Hainsworth and Paeth, 2010; Graham and Lowe, 2009).

Secondly, public theology refers to the ways in which religion interacts with questions of economics, media, politics, law, globalization, social justice and environment. It concerns the moral and material transformation not just of individuals, but powers and principalities, structures and systems.

And thirdly, it reflects a pledge to do one's theology *in public*: to conduct debates about the public trajectories of faith and practice in ways that are transparent and publicly accessible (Breitenberg, 2003). So public theologians regard themselves as rooted in religious traditions, but strongly in conversation with secular discourse and public institutions. As Max Stackhouse puts it,

‘if a theology is to be trusted to participate in public discourse it ought to be able to make a plausible case for what it advocates in terms that can be comprehended by those who are not believers ... It should be able to articulate its core convictions in comprehensible terms across many modes of discourse, explaining its symbolic and mythical terms ... in ways that expose their multiple levels of meaning.’ (Stackhouse M. , God and Globalization, Volume 4: Globalization and Grace, 2007, p. 112)

This is a sensibility that resists the ‘provinciality’ (Ziegler, 2002) of theology as merely that which originates from and informs the Church as exclusive community. Rather, any theology of public life must begin with the recognition that the interaction between Church and world, or Christ and culture, is always one of what John Reader has called ‘blurred encounters’ (Reader, 2005). This is born of an understanding of the Church as formed by the activities of God in Christ who wills the flourishing of all creation, and seeks to embody the attainment of the common good. The Church should certainly never cede ultimate authority to any temporal power, but is nevertheless called to exercise forms of critical solidarity with other institutions that further the virtues of justice, solidarity and human dignity. This in turn rests on particular doctrines of creation and incarnation, the nature of revelation and common grace, and of the possibility of a shared space by virtue of our common humanity in which rational communication about the ends, aims and substance of public life can be conducted.

As Max Stackhouse has put it,

‘From very early on one of the meanings of apologetics was that you enter into another person’s vocabulary and worldview as best you can, and the very fact that we can do that in some measure suggests that there is some deep contact between humans. Some profound creational theology is behind that: we are all children of God, whether everyone acknowledges it or not, and we can enter into one another’s vocabulary and begin to articulate the most profound things that we think are really true.’ (Chase, 2001)

Another way of thinking about this debate is to see it as caught between the perennial tension between the principles of what I might call ‘authenticity’ (to tradition) and ‘relevance’ (in the context of the context in which one finds oneself). Writing from an Australian context about the theological foundations of Roman Catholic schools, Tony Harkness talks about the tension between *authenticity* and *inclusion*: how the Church’s education policy and provision can be true to tradition and the core values of the Church (‘Have a strong Catholic identity and Give witness to Christian values’) yet reach out to wider constituencies (‘Be open and accessible to those who seek its values’) (Harkness, 2003, p. 2). This will best be achieved, he argues, through a ‘God-centred rather than Church centred theology of mission’. Mission, or involvement of Church in public policy, is not about ‘the work of the Church alone, exercised and directed through the powers and structures of the Church’, but is driven by an understanding of ‘the work of the Holy Spirit calling forth all of creation’ (Harkness, 2003, p. 4).

Harkness here draws on the work of Peter Phan, who has argued that theology of mission in the Roman Catholic tradition since Vatican II represented a decisive shift away from a church-centred model towards one of God at work in the world, and a focus on the Church in the world as an instrument or sacrament of God's mission. The Church is not an end in itself but a pointer to the way God acts in the world (Bosch, 1991:2). Phan criticises pre-conciliar Catholic missiology in which 'the center and heart of the missionary project is the church, and church understood primary in the institutional model' (Phan, 2002), understood as 'unique, exclusive, superior, definitive, normative and absolute' (Knitter, 1991:475, quoted in Harkness, 2004:4). Hence the emphasis in post-conciliar Catholic theology (especially theologies of mission and contextual theologies of inculturation) about mission as involving the humanisation of society as much as expansion of the Church; but crucially, also, it asks mission to locate itself from a theological and apologetic vantage-point, rather than an ecclesiological (and ecclesiastical) one. For Phan, post-Vatican II missiology has restored the four elements of mission to their right order: 'reign of God, mission, proclamation, and church' (Phan, 2002).

Theologically, I think the keynotes of this perspective are as follows:

- God-centred not church-focused – theological not ecclesiastical
- Creation, incarnation and common grace
- Mission as transformative not propositional; orthopraxy not orthodoxy

It's this commitment to engagement with non-theological sources and resources that has been one of the characteristic commitments of public theology, and gives rise to the suggestion it has an important 'apologetic' dimension. This stresses the significance of taking one's values into conversation and encounter in the hope of communicating 'God-in-the-world, *to* the world' (Graham and Lowe, 2009, p. 4).

#### **4. Deed and Word: Post-Secular Christian Identity in HE**

As well as commentary on public affairs from a religious standpoint, then, we might also conceive a further task of public theology as one of *Christian apologetics*, insofar as (especially in a religiously pluralist, global context) it is expedient to articulate (and be prepared to defend) the values that inform Christian statements about, and interventions in, the public realm. So what might this look like for a body like CUAC? I want to suggest a way of doing, or performing, public theology that integrates deed and word and which might serve as a theologically-rooted strategy for an engagement with higher education and public life in post-secular contexts.

Luke's Gospel speaks of Jesus of Nazareth as 'a prophet, powerful in deed and word before God and the people' (Luke 24.19). True theology involves that sacramental unity of acting and speaking: of *orthopraxis*, in which 'talk about God' is always primarily enacted in purposeful witness and directed towards transformation. So too, an effective public theology for a post-secular age will be an apologetics of speech *and* presence: embodying and demonstrating core values in the kind of institutions it models, and especially its commitment to the well-being of everyone, regardless of creed or profession of faith.

## ***Ambassadors for Christ: Public Theology as Christian Apologetics***

I have been arguing that public theologians face the challenge not only of articulating theologically grounded interventions in the public square, but of justifying and defending the very relevance of the Christian faith in a culture that no longer grants automatic access or credence. This was also one of the tasks with which the earliest Christians were charged. As Christian communities became established and dispersed around the Graeco-Roman world, so the imperative of interpreting and commending the faith to Jewish and pagan cultures became apparent.

In his *History of Apologetics* first published in 1971, Avery Dulles groups Christian apologetics into three main genres, depending on the context and intended audience. ‘*Religious apologies*’ argued for the superiority of the gospel over other religious or philosophical systems; ‘*internal apologies*’ were concerned to correct error or heresy within the Christian community itself; but a third group, which Dulles terms ‘*political apologies*’ developed their arguments in order to secure civil toleration of Christianity in the face of Imperial persecution (Dulles, 1999, p. 28). From the very beginning, then, the task of apologetics has been a piece of public theology, of defending and commending its claims against a variety of non-believers, detractors and persecutors: Jews, pagans, sceptics and Emperors.

That’s why the terminology of ‘ambassador’ seems particularly pertinent to our discussion of how public theologians and faith-based HEIs commend and articulate their concerns within a pluralist, post-secular public square. In the words of the second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 5.20), Christians are called to be ‘ambassadors for Christ’: not in order to shout down their opponents but to give plausible rationale for their presence in the public square.

Ambassadors are public representatives of a government or cause: when a citizen of one country meets an ambassador, they encounter not just an individual but the nation or organization in whose name they have been sent. An ambassador may be sent abroad, and therefore be on foreign territory, where the terms of engagement may not be of their making. The expectations of the role are of diplomacy and advocacy on behalf of one’s commissioning body, coupled with a respect for the context in which one finds oneself. Ambassadors and other diplomatic envoys are sent to build bridges, establish mutual benefit, and facilitate cultural exchange: there are no grounds to assume a position of victimhood, or antagonism, therefore, but only to receive the respect and hospitality due to an honoured representative, and to reciprocate.

## ***Bilingualism***

But apologetics is always a kind of *mediation* between the profession of faith and the world-view of others, as the work of Max Stackhouse suggests. This is consistent with the view of public theology I have been putting forward, which necessarily stands at the



threshold of church and world, of sacred and secular. It likes to speak of itself as being ‘bilingual’ (Breitenberg, 2010): mediating between the discourse of faith and that of wider society. In Heinrich Bedford-Strohm’s words, public theology ‘does not separate itself from the world into a self-sufficient counter-community with its own religious language, but knows how to speak the language of the world and how to be in dialogue with the world; a public theology that ... is grounded in Christ and therefore challenges the world to make God’s way for the world visible, a prophetic theology that leads the world beyond its worldly ways.’ (Bedford-Strohm, 2007, p. 36)

Being bilingual is not the same as speaking Esperanto. It does not deny pluralism and difference but nevertheless seeks ways of mediation and dialogue. So once again, we return to that tension between faithfulness to tradition and historic identity, with relevance to contemporary contexts: but this is a necessary tension, a creative dialectic, and one that has always lain at the heart of good theology.

Yet this conversational respect for the other represents an invitation to others in the name of common purpose and theology of revelation. It suggests that if we consider the (post-)secular public square as a primary space of engagement for Christian apologetics, then this serves up a dual task for those involved in theological and religious education (such as CUAC). It redirects the matter of Christian formation and education towards the practices of Christian apologetics, and establishes a stake for public theology in fostering theologically literate persons. It follows, then, that faith-based institutions must ensure they are promoting skills and aptitudes of religious literacy – of attempting to close the post-secular gulf - in the wider world. And secondly, that they are charged with a serious responsibility to equip the laity to exercise such a secular calling effectively.

### ***The Welfare of the City, not the Interests of the Church***

So the best apologists are those rooted in - but not confined to - the community of faith, because this is where the exemplary vision of truth and goodness is nurtured; but who then perceive a calling into the dialogical world of public debate and pluralist, post-secular culture. Its watchword in this respect might be from the exhortation from the prophet Jeremiah’ to ‘seek the welfare of the city’ (Jeremiah 29:7) – where the aim to forge common purpose over-rides partisan interest.

‘Public theology, as I understand it, is not primarily and directly evangelical theology which addresses the Gospel to the world in the hope of repentance and conversion. Rather, it is theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church ...’ (Forrester, 2004, p. 6)

## **5. Conclusion**

In contemporary terms, a public theology that ‘gives an account of the hope that is within you’ is something that demonstrates

convincingly, as much through action as words, that faith can make a positive difference to post-secular global civil society. I hope I have made some constructive suggestions about the particular calling of CUAC members in this respect. It's about being prepared, and theologically equipped, to offer an accessible and convincing account for your engagement in higher education and the grounds of your stake in its future, as a contemporary version of Christian apologetics. But this is apologetics not as a weapon of conversion, but a gesture of solidarity. It respects our common places of pluralism and encounter. It recognises that persons of belief must be called to account for their faith and be prepared to justify themselves; yet primarily, seeks to pursue a public vocation that is more interested in the well-being of humanity than narrow or partisan self-interest.

These are the challenges and opportunities facing members of CUAC in considering how you fashion your identity and engage with wider culture. It shapes the way you speak into public debates about the role of higher education in their various societies; the way you manage your corporate life and express core institutional values; the way they treat your students and staff; the way you model particular styles of learning, teaching and scholarship. It is a question of truth; identity; and vocation; but all of these are derived from the kind of 'public theology' – in deed and word – that lies at the very heart of your institutions and which serves as the well-spring of a distinctive Christian presence in higher education.

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